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'A Solemn Purification by Fire': Responses to the Great War in the Scottish Presbyterian Churches, 1914-19

by STEWART J. BROWN

During the Great War, leaders in the two major Presbyterian Churches in Scotland – the established Church of Scotland and the United Free Church – struggled to provide moral and spiritual leadership to the Scottish people. As National Churches which together claimed the adherence of the large majority of the Scottish people, the two Churches were seen as responsible for interpreting the meaning of the war and defining war aims, as well as for offering consolation to the suffering and the bereaved. At the beginning of the war, leaders of the two Churches had been confident of their ability to fulfil these national responsibilities. Both Churches had experienced a flowering of theological and intellectual creativity during the forty years before the war, and their colleges and theologians had exercised profound influence on the Reformed tradition throughout the world.¹ Both had been active in the 'social gospel' movement, with their leaders advancing bold criticisms of the social order.² The two Churches, moreover, had been moving toward ecclesiastical union when the war began, a union which their leaders hoped would restore the spiritual and moral authority of the Church in a covenanted nation.

The Great War, however, did not bring a revival of national religion in Scotland. Despite their pre-war influence and confidence, the Churches largely failed to assert national leadership during the war or to preserve their independent prophetic voice. Amid the disillusionment of the 1920s,

¹ D. J. Withrington, "'A ferment of change': aspirations, ideas and ideals in nineteenth-century Scotland', in D. Gifford (ed.), *The history of Scottish literature*, iii, Aberdeen 1988, esp. pp. 52-63; A. P. F. Sell, *Defending and declaring the faith: some Scottish examples 1860-1920*, Exeter 1987.

² D. C. Smith, *Passive obedience and prophetic protest: social criticism in the Scottish Church 1830-1945*, New York 1987, 245-325.

the Churches were remembered by many Scots as having played an 'indifferent' role in the war.³ The Great War seriously weakened the influence and authority of the Churches, and undermined efforts to achieve the Christian commonwealth.

While there have been a number of historical studies of the Churches in England and the First World War, there has been little comparable work on the Scottish Churches.⁴ This article will explore the responses of the Scottish Presbyterian Churches to the war, focusing on attitudes in the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church. Through a review of published sermons, addresses and General Assembly reports, it will survey the efforts of leading clerics and academics within the Scottish Presbyterian Churches to interpret the war and prepare for the peace. These efforts will be considered in three broad periods: first, the early months of the war, until about mid-1915, when ministers and academics had perceived the war primarily as a religious crusade, which would unite and transform the nation under God's will; second, the years of attrition, from about mid-1915 to mid-1917, as church leaders came to understand the actual conditions of modern warfare, especially on the Western Front, and as the weak hold of the Churches on the Scottish troops became painfully evident; finally, the period from about mid-1917 through to the peace settlement, as Scottish Church leaders sought to develop a new interpretation of the war, emphasising the sinfulness of pre-war society, and the need for national repentance and fundamental social reconstruction.

I

When Great Britain entered the war on 4 August 1914, few within the Scottish Presbyterian Churches were prepared for a general European conflict: there was a sense that 'war has come upon us with terrible and unlooked-for swiftness'.⁵ The crisis in the Balkans had swiftly and unexpectedly developed into a European conflagration, at a time when the greatest danger to peace had seemed nearer to home, across the North

³ See, for example, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's novel, *Sunset song*, London 1932, particularly the portrayal of the Revd Stuart Gibbon, who preaches a fierce patriotism and is rewarded with a call to a wealthy church in New York City after the war (esp. pp. 190-5, 247).

⁴ For studies of the English Churches and the war see A. Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, London 1978; A. Marrin, *The last crusade: the Church of England in the First World War*, Durham, NC 1974; S. Mews, 'Religion and English society in the First World War', unpubl. PhD diss. Cambridge 1973. A. J. Hoover, *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War: a study in clerical nationalism*, New York 1989, gives some attention to Scottish responses, though the emphasis is mainly on England and Germany. One of the few recent studies of the impact of the war on the Scottish Churches is P. Matheson, 'Scottish war sermons', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* xvii (1972), 203-13. There is also some discussion of the Scottish Churches and the war in Smith, *Passive obedience*, 356-62.

⁵ A. Wallace Williamson, sermon in St Giles, Edinburgh, 9 Aug. 1914, cited in *British Weekly*, 13 Aug. 1914; R. D. Kernohan, *Scotland's life and work*, Edinburgh 1979, 91-2.

Channel in Ulster, where Protestant Unionist resistance to the Liberal government's Home Rule bill threatened civil war. Despite the diplomatic tensions and fears of Germany's growing power and influence, many Scottish Presbyterians felt close religious and cultural ties with a predominantly Protestant Germany, the birthplace of the Reformation. A considerable number of Scottish Presbyterian clergy and academics had studied at German universities, and Hegelian idealism, German higher criticism and the liberal theology of Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf Harnack held honoured places in the Scottish divinity halls.⁶ Yet the close relations between Scottish and German Protestantism, like the international solidarity of socialism, collapsed in the face of national loyalty and the overwhelming conviction that Germany was the aggressor.⁷

With the outset of the war, Scottish Presbyterian clergy took a prominent role in recruitment, and delivered sermons and addresses in support of Britain's war effort. During the first several months, some 200 parish ministers in the Church of Scotland alone offered themselves as military chaplains, while an estimated 90 per cent of the sons of the manse who were of military age volunteered for military service during the first year of the war.⁸ In interpreting the outbreak of war, Scottish Presbyterian preachers and writers emphasised Germany's breaking of treaty pledges and invasion of neutral Belgium. Germany was the aggressor; it had 'willed' the war, committing 'a crime against humanity ... unexampled in history'.⁹ Britain had entered the war in self-defence, to preserve its liberty and its empire. But more than that, it had acted out of the principle of Christian love – coming to the aid of a small nation that had been invaded by a larger and more powerful neighbour. The British peoples were not fighting for national aggrandisement; they were vindicating the European covenant of nations.¹⁰ 'Surely', proclaimed the Church of Scotland minister, John Muir of Paisley, in a sermon on 9 August 1914, 'if ever in the history of mankind there has been a just war, it is this war.' 'Perhaps there has never been a war', observed the Church of Scotland magazine, *Life and Work*, in October 1914, 'on which the British nation entered with a clearer conscience than the conflict in which we are now engaged with Germany.'¹¹

⁶ A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Church in late Victorian Scotland 1874–1900*, Edinburgh 1978, 219–20; A. C. Cheyne, *The transforming of the Kirk*, Edinburgh 1983, 72.

⁷ In this severing of religious and cultural links, the experience of Scottish clergy and academics follows a larger British pattern. See Hoover, *God, Germany and Britain*, 3, 19, 36; S. Wallace, *War and the image of Germany: British academics 1914–1918*, Edinburgh 1988, 29–42.

⁸ *Reports on the schemes of the Church of Scotland*, 1915, 535; *Layman's book of the General Assembly of 1915*, ed. H. Smith, Edinburgh 1915, 7; G. A. Smith, *Our common conscience: addresses delivered in America during the Great War*, London 1918, 43.

⁹ Wallace Williamson, sermon in St Giles, Edinburgh, 9 Aug. 1914, cited in *British Weekly*, 13 Aug. 1914.

¹⁰ Matheson, 'Scottish war sermons', 205–6.

¹¹ J. Muir, *War and Christian duty*, Paisley 1915, 20; 'Some aspects of the Great War', *Life and Work* (Oct. 1914), 299.

It was also a war to preserve Christian values against a powerful nation that had regressed into a brutal paganism.¹² As with their counterparts in England, Scottish Presbyterian clergy directed attention to the threat of German *kultur*, a phrase used to convey an arrogant sense of superiority, a commitment to dominate Europe.¹³ Britain was fighting for Christian morality against a nation that glorified war and embraced 'social Darwinism' and Nietzsche's celebration of the will to power; it was defending spiritual values against the worship of science, materialism and the brute power of 'blood and iron'. For *Life and Work*, Germany had rejected Christianity for 'the religion of the super-man, of the vigorous and imposing personality, a religion in which might is right'.¹⁴ Germany, proclaimed the Church of Scotland minister, Walter Mursell of Paisley, had made a religion of the survival of the fittest, by which 'the powerful and vigorous nation is to display and justify its vigour and power by trampling upon the weak'.¹⁵ In joining the 'great spiritual protest against the *would-be* "Superman"', argued the leading United Free Church minister, Archibald Henderson, on 10 September 1914, the allied nations were acting as God's agents. 'No mere human power', he asserted, 'could have directed the [allied] nations... to so sound unanimity as to what *humanity* means.'¹⁶ 'We are fighting', declared the Church of Scotland minister, George Walker, on 23 August 1914, 'for the acknowledgement of God, a Just and Righteous God, as the one Supreme and only Ruler... whose Holy Name has been insulted and defiled.'¹⁷ For the United Free Church magazine, the *Record*, in November 1915, Britain was struggling 'for all the principles that constitute the essence of the Christian faith against the powers of evil as embodied in the spirit and practice of the enemy'.¹⁸ Because this war was so manifestly directed by the hand of God, Scottish Christians need not fear the corrupting effects that so often accompanied warfare. Christ, the editor of *Life and Work* assured Church members in September 1914, would 'guide the methods by which war is waged' ensuring that 'hatred and blind fury and blood-lust [will] have no place'.¹⁹

The outbreak of war also brought the prospect of a new national unity. For most of the nineteenth century, Presbyterian Church committees and social thinkers had been greatly concerned over the fragmentation of Scotland into competing economic interests, social classes and religious

¹² See the sermon by John Kelman of Free St George's, Edinburgh, cited in *British Weekly*, 5 Sept. 1914. ¹³ Hoover, *God, Germany and Britain*, 30-1.

¹⁴ 'The war of ideals', *Life and Work* (Nov. 1914), 323.

¹⁵ W. A. Mursell, *The bruising of Belgium*, Paisley 1915, 23. See also N. Maclean, *The great discovery*, Glasgow 1915, 33-4.

¹⁶ A. Henderson to A. Martin, 10 Sept. 1914, Alexander Martin Papers (uncatalogued), New College Library, Edinburgh.

¹⁷ G. Walker, *For the great cause: some bits of spiritual "munition-work" in heaven's "Great Cause" and our own*, Aberdeen 1915, 20.

¹⁸ 'The right shall win', *Record of the Home and Foreign Mission Work of the United Free Church* (Nov. 1915), 463. ¹⁹ 'Christ and War', *Life and Work* (Sept. 1914), 258.

sects. From the 1880s, there had been an active 'social gospel' movement in Scotland, with Presbyterian clergymen seeking to break down the barriers of class and to revive a sense of communal responsibility. During the mid-1890s, Presbyterian leaders had begun serious efforts for Church union, seeking to end the ecclesiastical divisions that had so long plagued Scottish religious life. The Free Church and United Presbyterian Church had joined to form the United Free Church in 1900, and the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church had begun formal union negotiations in 1908. Despite these efforts, however, Scottish society in the immediate pre-war years remained divided by industrial conflict, class hatreds and sectarian tensions.²⁰

Then came the beginning of the war and a new spirit of unity and co-operation. What men had seemed unable to achieve through the social gospel, God was providing through this war for ideals that transcended individual, class and denominational selfishness. Churches throughout the country were filled. At the beginning of the war, the Church of Scotland and United Free Church agreed to postpone the Church union negotiations for the duration, but relations between the two Churches grew closer as they co-operated in conducting joint prayer meetings and religious services at the parish and presbytery level.²¹ Soon they were sharing their divinity halls and professors, while, as many ministers volunteered for service as chaplains, neighbouring Church of Scotland and United Free Church congregations were often united. In a series of articles published in the *Scotsman* in late 1914, the Church of Scotland minister and journalist, Norman Maclean, gave an emotive account of the effects of the coming of war on his suburban Edinburgh parish. The parish church was overflowing and parishioners of different social classes were united as never before. They gave up the selfish pursuit of pleasure and amusements, and embraced a new commitment and discipline. Maclean's articles, reprinted as a small volume, *In our parish*, sold over 100,000 copies in several months.²² Most congregations formed work parties, made up mainly of women, to put together parcels – stockings, mufflers, gloves, tobacco, chocolate – which were sent to the troops. Ministers and church members gave hospitality, often for several months, to refugee families from Belgium, and they entertained soldiers and convalescents.²³ Ministers endeavoured to correspond with young men from the parish who enlisted, and often emerged as the only local person who could keep

²⁰ See, for example, H. M. B. Reid, *The cleavage in the Scottish Church*, Glasgow 1914, 7–9.

²¹ See, for example, the reports of the joint Church of Scotland/United Free Church intercessory prayer meetings and services in the *British Weekly*, 27 Aug., 5, 10, 17 Sept. 1914.

²² N. Maclean, *In our parish*, Edinburgh 1915; the articles were again reprinted in his *The great discovery*, Glasgow 1915.

²³ This is the impression gleaned from a survey of parish histories. See, for example, E. Tennant, *Bon-Accord United Free Church, Aberdeen*, Aberdeen 1928, 104–5; E. G. Murray, *The church of Cardross and its ministers*, Glasgow 1935, 164; J. R. Lee, *Greyfriars Glasgow*, Glasgow 1938, 92; W. Dickie, *History of Dowanhill Church*, Glasgow 1926, 132–3.

track of the movements of individual soldiers and sailors. There was also a dramatic decline in sectarian tensions between Protestant and Catholic in Scotland. Roman Catholic religious leaders, including the archbishops of Glasgow and of Edinburgh, gave their full public support to the war effort, and in response to their appeals, large numbers of Scottish Catholics volunteered.²⁴ 'The war', enthused *Life and Work* in September 1914, 'has already created a magnificent feeling of unity in the Empire, and has stilled the voice of faction.... The civic virtues of honour and courage and discipline will be trained.'²⁵

Along with national unity, the war also promised to bring a rejection of the materialism and selfishness that had seemed so prevalent during the previous century. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Presbyterian ministers and General Assembly committees had expressed concern over the collapse of Christian discipline, the decline of Sabbath observance, the obsession with material progress and wealth, and the love of sport and amusements.²⁶ Nineteenth-century industrialisation had brought unprecedented material wealth, but at the same time the people of liberal, industrial Scotland seemed to be losing their Christian character and values. Then came the war, 'like the sudden lifting of a curtain', and the nation turned instinctively to the Church. 'Everywhere', observed Norman Maclean, 'the sanctuaries filled, the eyes turned inward, for instinct is mightier than reason. The smoke of battle has revealed the face of God.' 'Under the shadow of the Cross now lifted up', he added, 'a nation that sought life's pleasures has suddenly thrilled with the glory of self-sacrifice.'²⁷ For the celebrated United Free Church preacher, John Kelman, on 2 September 1914, the war promised to bring 'a greater simplicity of living' ending 'the anxious and unsatisfying luxury which conventionality has imposed upon the past'.²⁸ 'In this crisis', asserted W. P. Paterson, Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh on 16 August 1914, 'as so often in the past, the perils and uncertainties of war are leading us back to God.'²⁹ For the United Free Church minister, John Adams, the 'healthy coalition between religion and war' was saving Scotland's youth from becoming 'a decadent race, intent simply on the pursuit of amusement or sport'.³⁰ The war, asserted the leading United Free Church theologian, Professor James Denney, in January 1915, has made the 'multitudes who were living on the surface of existence suddenly aware of its unsounded depths... The unseen and the eternal have forced themselves into their thoughts'.³¹

²⁴ T. Gallagher, *Glasgow: the uneasy peace*, Manchester 1987, 86.

²⁵ 'Christ and war', *Life and Work* (Sept. 1914), 258.

²⁶ See, for example, the final report of the Church of Scotland Commission on the Religious Condition of the People in *Reports on the schemes*, 1896, 747-868.

²⁷ Maclean, *The great discovery*, 13, 76-7.

²⁸ *British Weekly*, 5 Sept. 1914.

²⁹ W. P. Paterson, *In the day of the muster*, London 1914, 44.

³⁰ J. Adams, *The great sacrifice or the altar-fire of war*, Edinburgh 1915, 36.

³¹ J. Denney, *War and the fear of God*, London 1916, 27.

This new immediacy of the 'unseen and eternal' found expression in works of popular war fiction written by two Scottish Presbyterian authors during the first two years of the conflict – works which reflected the reports of supernatural occurrences that were prevalent among the British troops at the front.³² In May 1915, *Life and Work* published a short story entitled 'In the trenches', in which the soldier-narrator related being badly wounded in an attack on the German lines and lying exposed in 'no-man's land'. There he was rescued by a mysterious 'comrade in white' who carried him to a secluded cave by a stream, where he washed and healed the soldier's wounds. Revealing himself to be Christ, the 'comrade in white' promised to return with a special work for the soldier to do in his now sanctified life. The story, which combined a Celtic reverence for secluded places near a stream or pool of water, the picture of Christ caring for the British wounded, and the implied assurance that Britain's war effort had Christ's blessing, attracted great interest from the Scottish religious public – its impact perhaps heightened by the recent revelations of enemy cruelty, including the sinking of the *Lusitania* in April and the publication in May of the 'Bryce report', with its graphic accounts of German atrocities in Belgium.³³ Many of those who wrote to the editor of *Life and Work* were convinced that the story was true, perhaps because they needed fresh evidence that God was directing the war for the spiritual elevation of those who fought on his side. The author, the Revd William Leathem of Aberdeen, published three more stories in *Life and Work* dealing with Christ's appearances to aid the British wounded and bereaved, which were subsequently published just before Christmas 1915 as a small book, *The comrade in white*.³⁴ In early 1916, Charles L. Warr, who had been badly wounded at the Second Battle of Ypres and invalided out, published a volume of stories dealing with the war. Warr, a son of the manse from the Western Highlands, would later become a Church of Scotland minister. Graphic in their descriptions of war, the stories proved extremely popular, going through ten editions and becoming a favourite among the royal family. The title story, 'The unseen host', provides a version of the 'Angels of Mons' story. A British unit is defending a strategically vital section of trench against a German attack. Wave after wave of German troops swarm forward, their bodies piling up on the barbed wire, until the British machine gun jams. As the attackers are about to over-run the position, an 'unseen host' of angels, led by the archangel Michael, comes to the aid of the British survivors. The Germans alone can see the agents of divine vengeance and are frozen with terror;

³² For discussion of the role of rumour and legend in the war, see P. Fussell, *The Great War and modern memory*, Oxford 1975, esp. pp. 114–25.

³³ S. Hynes, *A war imagined: the First World War and English culture*, London 1990, 53–5.

³⁴ 'In the trenches', *Life and Work* (May 1915), 131. For reports of the intense interest in the story, see *ibid.* (July 1915), 196–7; (Nov. 1915), 335; and Kernohan, *Scotland's life and work*, 94–5. For the collection of stories see W. H. Leathem, *The comrade in white*, London 1915.

those who are not shot by the British defenders turn and flee. Other stories in Warr's collection dealt with supernatural manifestations – a wayside crucifix unharmed in the midst of battle, a drowning sailor whose life was saved and sanctified by Christ walking to him across the waters of the North Atlantic. In the preface, Warr insisted that the stories in his collection were to the best of his knowledge true, based on tales he had heard at the Front and expressing the heightened spiritual reality that prevailed there.³⁵

For the United Free Church minister, John Adams, the trenches were a scene of 'solemn purification by fire'. Through the shedding of their blood, the soldiers were renewing the nation's 'covenant' with God. 'These young men', Adams asserted of the soldiers at the front, 'have been lifted to a higher spiritual elevation.' The horrors of the trenches 'have only helped to roll away the stones, and to make our young men susceptible to spiritual influences of the highest quality'.³⁶ 'God will work out the salvation of your country', the Revd Nichol Service assured his Scottish congregation on 4 August 1915, 'through the blood of your brave sons.'³⁷ Many became convinced that out of the 'altar-fire of war' a religious revival was beginning. Out of this 'time of testing', declared the United Free Church minister, J. D. Robertson, in the *Record* for October 1914, will come 'the great religious awakening for which we have so long waited'.³⁸ In early 1915, the Pocket Testament League and the YMCA conducted a revivalist campaign among the troops quartered in Scotland that claimed over 12,000 converts. 'The war', declared one of the campaign workers, 'has at length brought the soldiers face to face with eternity, and they seem only waiting for a clear statement of the way of salvation, and a definite appeal to make the great decision.'³⁹ Supporters were confident that the revival beginning among the troops would spread to the nation at large: the Presbyterian Churches needed only to hold out their hands to catch the ripened fruit.

Not all Scottish Presbyterians, however, shared this view of the war as part of a providential plan. From the beginning, a few ministers, mainly from the progressive wing of the more liberal United Free Church, called for arbitration or negotiations to bring the war to an end. Tom Johnston, editor of the West of Scotland socialist newspaper, *Forward*, and member of the United Free Church, provided them with a forum in his paper.⁴⁰

³⁵ C. L. Warr, *The unseen host: stories of the Great War*, Paisley 1916. For the success of the volume see Warr's autobiography, *The glimmering landscape*, London 1960, 96–7.

³⁶ Adams, *Great sacrifice*, 4–5, 9, 10.

³⁷ W. J. Nichol Service, *War and the peace of God*, Glasgow 1915, 145.

³⁸ J. D. Robertson, 'The war and the Church', *Record of the Home and Foreign Mission Work of the United Free Church* (Oct. 1914), 438.

³⁹ G. J. B. Davis, 'Winning our soldiers for Christ: the story of a remarkable campaign in Scotland', *ibid.* (June 1915), 239–41.

⁴⁰ T. Johnston to R. E. Muirhead, 11 Mar. 1915, Muirhead Papers, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 3721/149/4.

The most influential Presbyterian critic of the war was James Barr, the United Free Church minister of St Mary's, Govan, in Glasgow. Barr was a leading temperance campaigner, a former opponent of the Boer War, an ex-president of the Peace Society, a Christian socialist and a critic of the idea of an established Church. For Barr the war was the bitter fruit of imperialism, the arms race and nationalist literature. 'To say that this war', he asserted in a sermon in October 1914, 'or any war, is inevitable, is to make surrender to blind necessity, and to renounce faith in God and man, and in the future of our race.' Men, not God, had made the war, and it was the responsibility of Christians to work for open diplomacy and a negotiated peace.⁴¹ In 1916 Barr was summoned before his Glasgow presbytery and threatened with removal from the ministry for his outspoken advocacy of peace negotiations and his membership of the Union of Democratic Control. He successfully defended himself before the presbytery, and helped defend another clergyman from the Glasgow area against similar charges the following year.⁴² However, Barr's was a largely isolated voice in Scotland. Viewing the war as a struggle against a godless enemy responsible for countless atrocities, most refused to contemplate a negotiated settlement. In May 1916, *Life and Work* dismissed pacifists as 'confused': 'the war being righteous, it should be prosecuted with all our power'.⁴³ There was also the widespread belief that the war was part of a divine plan for the elevation of national life. Speaking before the United Free Church presbytery of Ardrossan in April 1916, the Revd W. D. M. Sutherland 'questioned if the country were ready for peace'. 'It would be a calamity', he explained, 'if they got victory at this juncture before a real impression had been made on the great mass of the people'.⁴⁴

During the early months of the war, the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church had sought to identify the cause of Christian morality with that of the British war effort. The emphasis of the Scottish Presbyterian Churches was on the British cause, the defence of international justice and the integrity of the empire, rather than on a distinctive Scottish identity. Indeed, the response of Scottish clergy and academics to the opening of the war was similar to that of religious leaders in England. While many felt distress over the broken fellowship with the Churches and universities of Germany, there was a profound sense that the Presbyterian Churches must identify with the British peoples, and that the British cause was a righteous one. 'We stand', Wallace Williamson, minister of St Giles, Edinburgh, had assured the Church of Scotland on 9 August 1914, 'as we have always stood, for the great apostolic principles of humanity, patriotism, loyalty, and religion.'⁴⁵ Before the war, Presbyterian clergy, influenced by liberal theology and the doctrine of the

⁴¹ *Forward* (Glasgow), 17 Oct. 1914; and also 29 Aug. 1914; 16 Jan. 1915.

⁴² J. Barr, *Lang Syne*, Glasgow 1948, 57-67; *The Church and war*, Glasgow 1932, 40.

⁴³ 'Conscience and the war', *Life and Work* (May 1916), 135.

⁴⁴ Cited in Barr, *The Church and the war*, 38. ⁴⁵ *British Weekly*, 13 Aug. 1914.

Kingdom of God, had been seeking to engage with the problems of Scottish society and to reassert their social influence and authority. Now the war provided the Churches with the opportunity to demonstrate their solidarity with both the Scottish nation and the British state. As the editor of the *Layman's book of the General Assembly of 1915* enthused: ‘supremely this Assembly has emphasised the intense loyalty of the Church to King and country; it has vindicated the right of the Church to be regarded as truly national’.⁴⁶ The war promised to bring religious revival and to restore the moral authority of the Churches within Scottish society.

II

However, as the fighting continued through 1915 and into 1916, with the appalling costs in lives and money, the national unity promised at the beginning of the war proved fragile. Wartime pressures led to rising rents and prices and deteriorating conditions, especially for working-class families whose principal wage-earners were fighting and dying at the front, or for skilled artisans facing government policies of ‘dilution’, that is, the replacement of skilled artisans with unskilled or semi-skilled workers. There were demonstrations, rent strikes and industrial action, most dramatically along the Clyde during 1915 and early 1916. Some Scottish socialist politicians, including Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald, James Maxton and John Maclean, denounced the war as a struggle between capitalist empires for profits and markets. The Easter Rising of April 1916 in Dublin, with the military executions that followed, weakened support for the British cause within the West of Scotland Catholic community.⁴⁷ In the Presbyterian Churches, ministers were hard-pressed to comfort the growing numbers of bereaved and give hope to those with sons or husbands at the front – especially as so many ministers were themselves suffering personal loss. Over 90 per cent of the sons of Church of Scotland clergy who were of military age, it will be recalled, had enlisted during the first year of the war, most taking commissions – and the death rate among officers was very high. ‘As in ancient Egypt’, observed the United Free Church minister, George Reith, of the meeting of the General Assembly of 1917, ‘there was not a house where there was not one dead – and often more than one. Many of the fathers and brethren who assembled in May this year came up with heavy hearts from darkened homes.’⁴⁸ Congregations continued to participate in war-work, forming war savings associations, knitting stockings and mufflers, sending parcels to the men at the front, hosting patients from military hospitals. However, hopes of a religious revival died, and church attendances declined. Sunday school attendances fell by some 7,000 in the

⁴⁶ *Layman's book*, 132.

⁴⁷ Gallagher, *Glasgow*, 87.

⁴⁸ G. M. Reith, *Reminiscences of the United Free Church General Assembly*, Edinburgh 1933, 180.

Church of Scotland alone between May 1916 and May 1917.⁴⁹ The old problems of intemperance and sexual immorality remained, and may have increased, as means of escape from wartime pressures. Norman Maclean, the popular author of *In our parish*, had lost his optimism about the elevating effects of the war by late 1915. 'At one time', he confided to his fellow Church of Scotland minister, John White, in December 1915, 'I thought the war was to usher in a religious revival. I was mistaken. For a little time churches were fuller; but they are now as before. I can quite well believe that the war may bring us a revival of paganism after it is over.'⁵⁰ Writing in 1917, the editor of the United Free Church *Record*, W. P. Livingstone, observed how 'the official exponents of religion believed that men and women in their bewilderment and distress would turn to God: they had dreams of a revival which would fill the churches with repentant, surrendered souls. But no such movement has followed'. The Scottish people, he added, 'seem even more indifferent to the claims of organised religion'.⁵¹

The introduction of military conscription for single men in January 1916 – extended to married men in May 1916 – raised serious questions for Christians throughout Britain. The conscription acts established tribunals to consider appeals based on conscience, and the conscientious objector became a contentious figure, stirring impassioned debates.⁵² Wartime preaching in churches throughout Britain emphasised the sacrifices of the men at the front, sacrifices which were described as 'closely akin to the divine'. But was it the same thing when men were forced into the military to be killed or to kill others? Lacking a strong pacifist tradition, the Scottish Presbyterian churches on the whole showed little sympathy for the conscientious objector. The association of pacifism with the radical socialists on the Clyde may also have contributed to this lack of sympathy. The tone for Scottish Presbyterians was largely set by Sir George Adam Smith, principal of Aberdeen University, a leading Old Testament scholar and prominent advocate of the social gospel, in his opening address as moderator of the United Free Church General Assembly of May 1916. Smith denounced both conscientious objectors and pacifists, whose doctrines, he insisted, had 'no sanction in the Gospels'. On the contrary, those who refused to fight in this righteous war were turning Christianity 'upside down', and compulsion was necessary to force them to do their patriotic and Christian duty. As for alleged inequities in the system of conscription, Christians should not concern themselves with questions of 'equality of sacrifice' but should focus their minds on the 'high moral issues' of the war. The Church must support the

⁴⁹ 'The drift from the Church', *Record of the Home and Foreign Mission Work of the United Free Church* (Sept. 1916), 225–6; 'The Church and the nation', *Glasgow Herald*, 30 May 1917, 6. ⁵⁰ N. Maclean to J. White, 21 Dec. 1915, John White Papers, box 2.

⁵¹ W. P. Livingstone, *The new outlook*, London 1917, 4.

⁵² K. Robbins, *The abolition of war: the 'Peace Movement' in Britain 1914–1919*, Cardiff 1976, 70–92; Wilkinson, *Church of England*, 46–56.

state in its enforcement of conscription and give no encouragement to resisters. Smith also supported state censorship; there should be no criticism of the government or military in a righteous war.⁵³ Smith's address was received 'with rapt attention', lauded by the Scottish press, and published in pamphlet form; in 1918 the British Government sent him on a tour of the United States to express the Christian case for the war, perhaps with a particular eye on the influential Scottish-American population.⁵⁴

James Barr of the United Free Church was one of the few Presbyterian clergymen who openly championed the rights of the conscientious objector. In an address in his Glasgow church in September 1916, he criticised the pulpit denunciations of conscientious objectors by Scottish clergymen, especially as Presbyterian ministers were themselves exempt from conscription. Why should the clergy be exempt, he asked, in a Church which professed the 'priesthood of all believers' and did not view the clergy as a special priestly caste? If the Presbyterian clergy really wished to share fully in the war, why did they not protest against this exemption? 'If war is such an enobling and magnificent thing as some of them make out', Barr observed, 'I entirely fail to see why the clergy should not be in the forefront of it.'⁵⁵ (Later, in early 1918, many presbyteries in the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church would petition parliament to include clergymen in conscription.)⁵⁶

The first year-and-a-half of the war brought a gradual awakening in the Churches to the grim realities of trench warfare. W. P. Paterson, Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh University, recorded in his diary in March 1915 the shock of having the actual conditions at the front described to him by one of his former students, a chaplain. 'It is not war', Paterson noted sadly, 'all the romance and honour have gone out of it.... The horror of it is unimaginable.' In May 1915, the leading figure in the Church of Scotland, A. Wallace Williamson, minister of St Giles, Edinburgh, former moderator, and eloquent preacher of the righteousness of the war, visited the trenches for the first time and returned deeply shaken. 'One was aware', recalled a close friend, 'of the virtue that had gone out of him, and how burdened he was with the grim horror of the thing.'⁵⁷ The darkened mood after 1915 was reflected in war fiction. In October 1916, Charles L. Warr, the author of *The unseen host*, published a second volume of stories about life in the trenches, entitled *Echoes of Flanders*. In contrast to the first collection, the second has virtually no

⁵³ G. A. Smith, *The war, the nation and the Church: two addresses to the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland, May 1916*, London 1916, 17-27.

⁵⁴ Reith, *Reminiscences*, 171; Smith, *Our common conscience*, pp. vii-ix, 1-3.

⁵⁵ J. Barr, *The conscientious objector: a lecture delivered in St Mary's United Free Church, Glasgow*, London 1916, 30-2.

⁵⁶ See, for example, the reports in the *Glasgow Herald*, 2, 8, 10 May 1918.

⁵⁷ *The Diaries of W. P. Paterson*, ed. C. L. Rawlins, Edinburgh 1987, 133; Lord Sands [C. N. Johnston], *Life of Andrew Wallace Williamson*, Edinburgh 1929, 281.

supernatural occurrences or divine interventions. The stories deal with courage and endurance in the face of unimaginable horrors, but most end in the death of the central characters. For example, the final story, 'Wee Jock', juxtaposes the lonely death of a dedicated Edinburgh slum minister (who is also the last chief of his Highland clan) with the death in battle of the slum lad he had befriended – a lad who knew only abject poverty at home and is horribly mutilated by German artillery and then finished off in the gassing of the aid station. Christian hope, Warr seems to suggest, must focus on the afterlife, and not on a Scottish nation whose lifeblood was being drained in the prolonged struggle.⁵⁸

After mid-1916, there were few claims of religious revival in the trenches. 'We have heard about conversions and revivals in the earlier part of the war', wrote a chaplain with a Scottish battalion in France in the *United Free Church Record* in April 1917, 'but I fear that many people guilelessly gave the impression that these were deeper than they actually were. At least they do not exist now.' Far from encouraging spiritual concerns, the chaplain continued, trench life focused the mind on the physical and material, while the Church's hold on the troops was very weak. If the soldiers had any faith, it was a grim fatalism.⁵⁹ A former probationary minister of the United Free Church who had enlisted in the army at the beginning of the war reported that soldiers at the front were soon stripped of all Christian values. 'Self-indulgence, riotous living, theft, obscenity, violence – these seem no longer wrong, and he who disclaims against them seems unintelligible if not amusing.' The only virtue the men respected was courage, and this was often accompanied by defiance of authority.⁶⁰ Reacting to the irreligion at the front, two Church of Scotland ministers argued in a volume of wartime addresses published in 1917 that there was need for a Protestant doctrine of purgatory. There unrepentant soldiers dying in a righteous cause might be prepared for the 'heaven that cannot at once receive them'.⁶¹ After eighteen months as a chaplain on the Western Front, the United Free Church minister, A. Herbert Gray, was most struck by the widespread indifference to the Church. In many units, fewer than 10 per cent of the men were practising Christians.⁶² The average soldier, Gray maintained, 'regards the church as a negligible quantity. He neither fears nor loves it. It has for him no voice of authority'.⁶³

Gray's perceptions found support in a study of the religious state of the troops conducted by a committee of the British Churches formed in 1916 under the chairmanship of Edward Talbot, bishop of Winchester. The

⁵⁸ C. L. Warr, *Echoes of Flanders*, London 1916.

⁵⁹ J. Black, 'Our soldiers: the influence of the war on their religious ideas', *Record of the Home and Foreign Mission Work of the United Free Church* (Apr. 1917), 82.

⁶⁰ 'The Church and the soldier', *ibid.* (Nov. 1917), 213.

⁶¹ N. Maclean and J. R. P. Sclater, *God and the soldier*, London 1917, 205–8; see also Hoover, *God, Germany and Britain*, 110.

⁶² A. Herbert Gray, *As Tommy sees us: a book for church folk*, London 1917, 6–43.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 6.

study was conducted through questionnaires completed by chaplains with the British forces, and the report was written largely by Professor David Cairns of the Aberdeen United Free Church College. Although the report was not published until after the end of the war, the content of the chaplains' responses was being publicly discussed in Scotland by the spring of 1917.⁶⁴ According to the chaplains, only about 20 per cent of the British troops had any church connection, with the percentage slightly higher in Scottish units. While nearly all soldiers had attended Sunday school, the large majority had left the Church as soon as they reached young adulthood.⁶⁵ Despite their instruction in childhood, few had any understanding of the Incarnation or the atonement (although there was respect for Jesus as fellow sufferer). What religion they did hold tended to be a 'trench fatalism', a vague belief that a soldier would only die when his number was up, or only be killed by the bullet or shell with his name on it. God was an inscrutable and arbitrary being, who either would not or could not stop the appalling slaughter.⁶⁶

There was little respect among the troops for the moral teachings or authority of the Churches – as was reflected in widespread petty theft, profanity, gambling, drunkenness, and visits to prostitutes. Despite the work of pre-war liberal theologians and Christian social progressives, the men were ignorant about the Churches' social teachings, including the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. There was, moreover, a general feeling, especially pronounced in the Scottish regiments, that the Churches were self-interested bodies, which had failed to take any real stand on social issues and which had ceased to count in the struggle for social justice. The highest values among the troops were fellowship and loyalty. Indeed, the soldier who showed no respect for the Church's teachings on individual morality or personal salvation was often prepared to give up his life to save a comrade, or rush into certain death in order to hold the respect of his fellows.⁶⁷ It was in this area of social ethics that some Scottish soldiers felt the Church's failure was most glaring. 'The chief criticism of the Churches', reported a chaplain with a Scottish regiment, 'is that they are futile. They do nothing and have done nothing; they are taking no lead in dealing with social problems, in righting wrongs and controlling national life and policy; they have shown little sympathy with those struggling to produce a better order of things.' The Church, he added, was regarded as part of the pre-war social order, and the men were not so much hostile as 'indifferent' to it, regarding it as irrelevant in the new world that had emerged with the war.⁶⁸ According to a United Free Church chaplains' committee, Scottish soldiers believed the Church 'ignores social wrongs and winks at abuses from which its members profit;

⁶⁴ The responses, for example, were discussed in the United Free Church General Assembly on 25 May 1917: *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the United Free Church*, 1917, 182–4.

⁶⁵ *The army and religion*, ed. D. S. Cairns, London 1919, 238–56. ⁶⁶ *Ibid* 160–5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*. 125–54.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*. 207–10.

it is selfish and accords no welcome to the more indigent classes; it proclaims half-truths and ignores those that would reform society; it is altogether too narrow and unsympathetic; there are too many divisions in it and unseemly denominational rivalries'.⁶⁹ Christians seemed selfish in their concern with personal salvation; they were perceived, according to A. Herbert Gray, as 'too busy hugging themselves with delight because they are saved' to have much real concern for those outside the Church.⁷⁰

At the beginning of the war, the Scottish Presbyterian Churches had viewed it as a religious crusade, which would unite, cleanse and elevate the nation. However, as the war dragged on with its staggering costs, many in the Churches developed doubts about this interpretation. Most continued to believe that Britain's cause was just, and remained soberly committed to 'seeing it through'. There was confidence in the generals, especially Earl Haig, an elder in the Church of Scotland and a regular worshipper. But the war was not bringing people back to Christianity or restoring the authority of the National Church. The troops at the front and the population at home were demonstrating courage and endurance, but the Church did not seem to be playing a central role in the war effort. There had been no religious revival: on the contrary, attendance at public worship was declining, while chaplains reported that only a small percentage of the troops had any Church connection. Emotionally drained by continued bereavements and war work, ministers and congregations had little energy for home mission and philanthropic work, while the civil state was taking a more active role in social welfare and public health, in large part to ensure the efficiency of munitions production and other war work.⁷¹ The Scottish people, observed the *Glasgow Herald* on 30 May 1917, were less and less prepared to listen to the Churches' claims that the war was a crusade for 'the God of Righteousness and His Christ'. 'This view of the struggle', it continued, 'is giving way to the more secular interpretation that it is a fight between government by force and government by freedom.'⁷² The Church was becoming increasingly subordinate to the state, and for many, it was largely irrelevant to the national struggle.

As the war continued without victory and the nation seemed increasingly indifferent to the Churches' authority, some Presbyterian clergymen embraced a darker, prophetic vision, portraying Scotland not as a divine agent but as a nation under judgement, no more justified in the eyes of God than other nations. This was the view of the leading 'High Church', or Scoto-Catholic, Church of Scotland minister, H. J. Wotherspoon, writing in 1917. The war, Wotherspoon suggested, was not so much a righteous work by godly nations, as a divine visitation

⁶⁹ Ibid. 212.

⁷⁰ Gray, *As Tommy sees us*, 12; idem, 'Fellowship in the army and the Church', *The Church and the war: tracts for to-day*, no. 6, Edinburgh 1917, 43-5.

⁷¹ J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British people*, London 1986, esp. pp. 154-212.

⁷² 'The Church and the nation', *Glasgow Herald*, 30 May 1917, 6.

on the whole of human civilisation for its presumption and moral decadence. Scotland was suffering together with the other nations because it too had turned from God. ‘The whole world’, Wotherspoon asserted, ‘has come into judgment and we with it.’ ‘By the unmerited grace of God’, he continued, ‘we are permitted to suffer in a good cause.’ ‘But’, he also maintained, ‘it is not true to say, as is said, that we are now suffering because we chose the better part. We should have suffered in any case.’⁷³ It was time for the Church to acknowledge its failings, recover its prophetic voice, and call upon the nation to confess and repent its corporate sins.

III

At their annual meetings in May 1916, the General Assemblies both of the Church of Scotland and of the United Free Church appointed special commissions to explore the moral and spiritual meaning of the war. In this, the two Presbyterian assemblies were strongly influenced by the plans developing in the Church of England after October 1915 for a National Mission of Repentance and Hope.⁷⁴ The two Presbyterian commissions were made up of roughly equal clerical and lay membership, and they included most of the leading figures in the Scottish Churches. In supporting the overture to establish the Commission on the War in the Church of Scotland General Assembly on 26 May 1916, A. Wallace Williamson emphasised the confusion of many in the Church and nation about the war. ‘Since August 1914’, he observed, ‘they had been as men in a dream.’ The Church needed to study and reflect, so that it could offer guidance to the nation. Above all, it needed to recover its independent prophetic voice. ‘Let this Commission ask itself’, the Revd J. G. Dickson of Edinburgh advised the Church of Scotland Assembly, ‘why there should be people who say to-day that Christianity is a failure and the Church worthless.’⁷⁵

In May 1917, the two commissions presented their first reports, which in both cases made radical criticisms of the religious and moral state of Scottish society. The war, according to the Church of Scotland Commission on the War, had arisen out of the predominant materialism of Western culture, the decline of Christian belief and the abandonment of Christian morality in social and international relations.⁷⁶ It was a divine visitation upon a civilisation that had turned from God and placed its confidence in human effort and unlimited material progress. As a visitation, the war was ‘at once judicial and remedial’. It was judicial, in that it was an indictment of the selfish individualism, materialism and aggressive nationalism that pervaded the West. ‘Our modern civilisation’, the commission asserted, ‘apart from the support of Christianity, is

⁷³ H. J. Wotherspoon, *Some spiritual issues of the war*, London 1918, 15, 18.

⁷⁴ Wilkinson, *Church of England*, 70–3; F. A. Iremonger, *William Temple*, Oxford 1948, 204–7.

⁷⁵ *Layman’s book*, 55, 56.

⁷⁶ *Reports on the schemes*, 1917, 723–58.

bankrupt.⁷⁷ All the European nations were suffering, because all had shared in Europe's sin – although Germany, the commission insisted, was clearly the most guilty.

The visitation of war was also remedial, in that it summoned the Scottish people to repentance and reform, not only as individuals but as a nation. The greatest lesson of the war was the transcendent importance of the corporate life over individual self-interest. 'Within our Christianity itself', the commission observed, 'we have with considerable success followed out the Christian inference as for the soul; [but] we have neglected its corporate and social inference. The War, which is a thing of nations and of corporate life, calls us to face these applications of Christianity.'⁷⁸ Here was a role for the National Church in the midst of the war. The Church must work for the reconstruction of society, to ensure that the war would lead to a more just social order. 'It is for the Church, inspired by the vision of the Kingdom of God, to use the occasion provided by the providence of God for the purpose of securing a drastic and permanent amelioration of social conditions. "Never again" must be her watchword as she contemplates the chaos of pre-war conditions.'⁷⁹ The United Free Church's 'Committee on the Present Situation as Affected by the War' presented a similar report to its Assembly of 1917. It included severe criticism of the competitiveness and industrial strife of pre-war Scotland and called for greater co-operation in the social and economic spheres.⁸⁰

During the following months, the commissions of the two Presbyterian Churches worked closely together in calling the nation to repentance and reform. The commissions endeavoured to co-operate with the wartime coalition government's Committee on Reconstruction, which was formed in March 1917 to plan for post-war social reform. Beginning in March 1917, the Churches held jointly a series of conferences in different Scottish cities to explore social issues and consider government reform proposals for housing and industry. In April 1917 the United Free Church Committee began issuing a series of 'Tracts for to-day' by prominent Scottish Christian thinkers, including David Cairns, A. Herbert Gray, R. J. Drummond, and J. H. Oldham.⁸¹ The Church of Scotland Commission invited leading experts on social work and policy to prepare papers on such issues as housing, industrial unrest, rural depopulation, education and child welfare. Published early in 1918 under the title *Social evils and problems*, the papers were meant to prepare the Church for leadership in post-war reconstruction.⁸² The Church commissions instructed individual congregations to discuss the commission reports and publications, and prepare their members for the work of reconstruction at the local level. In April 1917, moreover, the Churches revived the

⁷⁷ Ibid. 740.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 741.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 753.

⁸⁰ *Proceedings and debates of the General Assembly of the United Free Church*, 1917, 166–70.

⁸¹ United Free Church, *The Church and the war: tracts for to-day*, Edinburgh, 1917–18.

⁸² W. P. Paterson and D. Watson (eds), *Social evils and problems*, Edinburgh 1918.

negotiations for the union of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church, negotiations which had been suspended at the beginning of the war. It was now seen as vital that a united National Church of Scotland would co-operate with the coalition government in the work of post-war reconstruction. 'We answered the call of Belgium', wrote the United Free Church minister, C. M. Robertson of Dunfermline, 'Shall we turn a deaf ear to the wronged at home... or shall we again stand shoulder to shoulder in the coming Great War against Poverty?'⁸³ 'Our aim', asserted the Church of Scotland Commission on the War in its report of May 1918, 'must be under God to make Scotland a Christian country in fact as well as in name, to realise the vision of our forefathers, and to build in Scottish fields a true city of God.'⁸⁴ In early 1918, the commissions of the two Churches began planning together for a National Mission of Rededication.⁸⁵

It was soon evident, however, that Scottish Presbyterians were divided over the pronouncements coming from the two commissions. Some were put off by what they viewed as a defeatist or pessimistic tone. They could see no reason for the Church now to portray Britain as partly guilty for the war and to call for national repentance, while the Scottish people were daily demonstrating great endurance and heroism in the righteous struggle. 'I don't somehow like this harping on "National Sins"', wrote the conservative churchman, H. M. B. Reid, Professor of Divinity at Glasgow University, to John White on 16 December 1916; 'In this conflict, the National Sinners are our foes.' For Reid, calls for corporate repentance reflected the desire of some Scots ecclesiastics to 'imitate' the 'whining tone of the Anglican "Mission"'. 'To my mind', he argued, 'it will take much to prove that our baptised and confirmed people, fighting and dying, are to be roughly called to a confession of national sins.... I may add that I don't stand alone in this. It is a feeling shared by some of our most devoted Glasgow ministers and evangelists.'⁸⁶ In October 1917, J. H. Dickie of Glasgow, a member of the Church of Scotland Commission, complained to a fellow commission member that the literature produced by the commission was 'lamentable, ineffective, academic, rotten'. Commission members, he claimed, were not allowed to see the literature before it was issued, and the commission's work was becoming 'scandalous'.⁸⁷ Part of the difficulty was that ideas of national sin and corporate repentance had become alien to Scottish Presbyterians. The traditional ideas of covenant, corporate discipline and national fasts had waned during the nineteenth century, and Scottish Presbyterianism had become individualistic in its piety and largely voluntary in its organisation. Local church members often could not understand what

⁸³ C. M. Richardson, 'A plea for the industrial drudges', *The Church and the war: tracts for to-day*, no. 11, Edinburgh 1917, 82-3. ⁸⁴ *Reports on the schemes*, 1918, 629.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 621.

⁸⁶ H. M. B. Reid to J. White, 16 Dec. 1916, John White Papers, box 42.

⁸⁷ J. H. Dickie to J. White, 30 Oct. 1917, *ibid.* box 1.

corporate repentance involved or what the commissions expected them to do. David Young, the Church of Scotland minister of Renfrew, held conferences in his church in January 1918 in an effort to give what he termed 'loyal support' to the commission's work. Yet as he informed a leading commission member, his congregation experienced only confusion when they endeavoured to go beyond 'windy talk' and 'get down to real things'. Young found the commission's guidance and literature worse than useless. 'The Commission', he concluded, 'is just wasting paper, and paper is scarce.'⁸⁸

When the Church of Scotland Commission on the War presented its first report to the General Assembly on 29 May 1917, the attendance at the session was extremely small and efforts had apparently been made to limit debate: the session was held in the evening and was given over to lengthy speeches by a few leading commission members which left almost no time for discussion.⁸⁹ In the United Free Church Assembly of 1917, however, the first report of the Committee on the Present Situation as Affected by the War was subjected to a concerted attack by prominent figures in the Church. The celebrated preacher, John A. Hutton of Glasgow, protested against 'the sad and complaining' tone of the whole report, which failed to convey the true mood of the nation. The ordeal of war, Hutton insisted, continued to unite and spiritually elevate the Scottish people: 'I find, wherever I go, a new tenderness, a new fulness of life which cannot but bless the world.' D. W. Forrest, Professor of Systematic Theology at Glasgow United Free Church College, objected to the report's criticism of economic individualism and its call for co-operation in industry – which, he claimed, amounted to advocacy of the aims of the 'extreme socialist movement'. He was supported by Archibald Henderson, who argued that the report's assertion that 'men are not to work for private gain but for public service [was] directly contrary to the doctrine of Scripture'.⁹⁰ In response to the powerful opposition in the assembly, the report was substantially modified in matter and tone, and the committee was dealt a sound defeat. 'It is no part of the duties of Assembly committees', observed the United Free Church minister, George M. Reith, of this debate, 'to supply hostile critics with ammunition for their campaign against the Church, nor to assume that the evils afflicting social and national relations are due to her unfaithfulness.'⁹¹

Many within the Churches, then, did not perceive the ordeal of the war to be the result of sinfulness either in the Church or the existing social order. The war may have highlighted failings on the part of some

⁸⁸ D. Young to J. White, 11 Jan. 1918, *ibid.* box 26; Scottish Presbyterian difficulties with the conception of corporate repentance were similar to those experienced in England in response to the National Mission of 1916: R. Lloyd, *The Church of England 1900–1965*, London 1966, 226–31.

⁸⁹ 'The Church and the nation', *Glasgow Herald*, 30 May 1917, 6.

⁹⁰ *Proceedings and debates of the General Assembly of the United Free Church*, 1917, 166–191, esp. pp. 170–2, 180.

⁹¹ Reith, *Reminiscences*, 188.

individuals or groups in society, but on the whole Scotland was steadfast in the cause it had taken up in August 1914: its endurance was a testimony to the essential soundness of the pre-war social order. Those who had described the war as a religious crusade in 1914 would not now say it was a divine punishment: to do so would seem to be breaking faith with those who had suffered and died. Many also disliked what they perceived as a bias toward Christian socialism in the commissions' emphasis on social reconstruction.⁹² No strong leaders emerged in the crisis to champion the Churches' ideal for post-war reconstruction. In May 1918, the *Glasgow Herald* advised the Presbyterian Churches to cease their calls for social reform. Church involvement in social questions would be of no help to the state and was only creating 'discord and division' among church members.⁹³

The prolonged agony of the war was resulting in renewed social tensions by 1918. There was a revival of labour unrest, especially in the West of Scotland, while many looked favourably on the Bolshevik coup of November 1917 in Russia. Growing disaffection in Ireland, including resistance to the attempted introduction of conscription there in 1918, served to revive sectarian tensions. There was a renewal of anti-Catholicism in the Scottish Presbyterian Churches: the pope's efforts to arbitrate a peace settlement in 1917 convinced many Scottish Presbyterians that the Roman Catholic Church was on the side of the Central Powers.⁹⁴ At the beginning of the war, there had been considerable sympathy for Roman Catholics in Belgium and France. The Roman Catholic hierarchy in Scotland had encouraged enlistment and tens of thousands of Scottish Catholics had fought and died. In June 1918, however, *Life and Work*, the official magazine of the Church of Scotland, portrayed the Roman Catholic Church as not only 'the enemy of Great Britain and the friend, more or less avowed, of Germany', but as responsible for numerous 'outrages [against] international right and human liberty' since the war began.⁹⁵ Along with the revival of sectarian divisions, some Presbyterian congregations seemed to identify their Church with an exclusive nationalism. Upon entering his first charge in the spring of 1918, the newly ordained Church of Scotland minister, Charles Warr, recalled that 'the Church, to an unfortunate degree, had become an instrument of the state and in too many pulpits the preacher had assumed the role of recruiting sergeant. Almost every place of worship throughout the length and breadth of the land displayed the Union Jack, generally placed above the Holy Table'. In one of his early sermons, Warr denounced anyone talking of a negotiated peace as 'a moral and spiritual leper' who should be cut off from the community: the remark was 'duly

⁹² H. J. Wotherspoon, *James Cooper*, London 1926, 282-3, 285; Reith, *Reminiscences*, 188.

⁹³ 'The Church's outlook', *Glasgow Herald*, 30 May 1918, 4.

⁹⁴ 'Report of the committee on church life and work', *Reports to the General Assembly of the United Free Church*, 1919, 4-5.

⁹⁵ 'The cloven foot once more', *Life and Work* (June 1918), 84.

lauded' by the press. 'That was', Warr later remembered, 'the muddled, fuddled atmosphere we were living in during the last years of the war.'⁹⁶

IV

In November 1918, the armistice was signed. The mood in the Churches was one of relief, and also of exhaustion. There was little disposition among Scottish Presbyterian leaders to feel charity toward Germany: only about a dozen members in the United Free Church General Assembly of 1919 supported a motion by A. Herbert Gray critical of the post-war blockade of food and the harshness of the Versailles treaty, while no criticism of the blockade and treaty was made in the Church of Scotland Assembly.⁹⁷

Despite war-weariness, Presbyterian leaders did attempt to honour their pledges to work for post-war reconstruction. On 21 December 1918, following the November general election, the moderators of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland and United Free Church issued a joint call for a National Mission of Rededication. The moment had come for the nation to give thanks for its deliverance, to rededicate itself to God and begin the work of Christian social reconstruction. 'Spared lives are holy things', the moderators observed, 'saved for high and worthy service of God, and not to be wasted on small or selfish ends. The whole life of our nation has acquired a new sacredness.'⁹⁸ After weeks of prayer and preparation, the National Mission was held during a six-week period from late March to early April. Mission workers undertook house-to-house visits and distributed tracts; churches held special services and meetings; and on Rededication Sunday, 19 April, congregations solemnly pledged themselves to work for the sovereignty of Christ in all spheres of social life.⁹⁹ A month later, at the first post-war meetings of the two General Assemblies, expressions of thanksgiving for deliverance were combined with calls for church renewal and social reconstruction. The Church of Scotland Commission on the War presented a wide-ranging report on the 'Life and efficiency of the Church', which strongly criticised 'the failure of the Church to identify herself closely with the efforts and aspirations of the masses' and called for greater fearlessness 'in exposing the wrongs which have crept into our social, industrial and commercial system'.¹⁰⁰ The Church of Scotland General Assembly transformed its Commission of the War into a standing Church and Nation Committee, with responsibility for the corporate life of the nation. In his closing address as moderator of the Church of Scotland Assembly, Professor W. P. Paterson,

⁹⁶ Warr, *The glimmering landscape*, 118-19.

⁹⁷ J. R. Fleming, *A history of the Church in Scotland, 1875-1929*, Edinburgh 1933, 98; Reid, *Reminiscences*, 208-9. ⁹⁸ 'National rededication', *Glasgow Herald*, 21 Dec. 1918, 6.

⁹⁹ See the folder on the National Mission of Rededication in the John White Papers, box 16. ¹⁰⁰ *Reports on the schemes*, 1919, 645, 661.

who had lost two sons in the war, called on the nation to 'covenant together' for the Christian commonwealth.¹⁰¹

The calls for the new Christian social order, however, inspired little action among an exhausted and emotionally drained people who longed for a speedy return to some kind of normality. With a few local exceptions, the National Mission of Rededication aroused no enthusiasm among church members, and it was largely ignored outside the Churches. Meetings were poorly attended and many congregations refused to take any part in the mission.¹⁰² There was much vagueness and confusion. 'The Mission', admitted Lord Sands, one of the organisers, 'was handicapped in the same way as the Commission on the War which originated it, viz., by indefiniteness of aim.'¹⁰³ Liberals objected to the mission as an attempt to get up a religious 'revival' in the manner of old-style professional revivalists, diverting attention from pressing social issues to matters of personal salvation. Conservatives suspected that the calls of the mission for church involvement in post-war reconstruction amounted to a 'political crusade', with a bias in favour of the claims of organised labour.¹⁰⁴ Congregations were far more concerned with erecting and consecrating war memorials for the dead than with embarking on new crusades for social reconstruction. Further, the state had already taken decisive action against poverty during the war: living conditions for the poorest members of society had improved considerably, while social inequalities had been reduced.¹⁰⁵ The Franchise Act of 1918, moreover, had brought democracy and a political voice for the poorest sections of the population.

During the early 1920s, the courts and committees of the two Presbyterian Churches ceased calling for social reconstruction. Social progressives found little support in the church courts for calls for social reform, while conservatives argued that the Church had no competence to speak on social and economic issues and should restrict itself to matters of individual morality and personal salvation. While the Churches professed a commitment to healing social wounds and reconciling conflicting social interests, this was combined with an unwillingness to take actions that might alienate or divide the largely middle-class membership. The Cairns report on *The army and religion* – with its call for bold action by the Churches in confronting social injustice and deprivation – received little attention in the Presbyterian church courts after its publication in 1919, and its recommendations were soon

¹⁰¹ W. P. Paterson, *Recent history and the call to brotherhood*, Edinburgh, 1919, esp. pp. 5–16, 20–33.

¹⁰² See, for example, letters from disappointed mission supporters in the *Glasgow Herald*, 17, 21 April 1919.

¹⁰³ Cited in 'The mission of national re-dedication: after-impressions', John White Papers, box 16.

¹⁰⁴ 'The position of the Churches', *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Jan. 1919, 4; Sands, *Andrew Wallace Williamson*, 289–90; A. Muir, *John White*, London 1958, 185–6.

¹⁰⁵ Winter, *Great War*, 103–53, 213–45.

forgotten. The Churches provided little guidance to Scottish society in the turbulent post-war years, and offered no protest as the post-war coalition government withdrew from many of its wartime promises of reconstruction. The influence of pre-war liberal theology and the social gospel waned, and many Scots Presbyterians found a more satisfying grounding for their faith in Karl Barth's neo-Calvinist 'theology of crisis'.¹⁰⁶ Membership of the Presbyterian Churches remained at pre-war levels through the 1920s, and may have even increased slightly in the immediate post-war years. In 1929, moreover, the Church of Scotland and the majority of the United Free Church were finally united, in one of the largest church unions of the twentieth century. But the war brought no revival of national religion and no building of the Christian commonwealth in Scotland. The war-time expressions of Presbyterian ministers and academics, concerning the elevating effects of the war as religious crusade or the promise of a new, more just social order, would haunt the Church with a sense of loss and shame during the troubled years that followed.

¹⁰⁶ Fleming, *History of the Church in Scotland*, 238.